

The Death of Eros

Allan Bloom, 1993

The word "love" now applies to almost everything except the overwhelming attraction of one individual for another. And sex is a timid pseudoscientific word which tells us only that individuals have certain bodily needs. There is an appalling matter-of-factness in public speech about sex today. On television, schoolchildren tell us about how they will now use condoms in their contacts -- I was about to say adventures, but that would be overstating their significance. On talk shows, young collegians tell us about how they decide whether they have been raped in their various encounters. There is nothing in these tales of the now-impossible complaint about outraged virginity. Sex is spoken of coolly and without any remains of the old puritanical shame, as an incidental aspect of the important questions of disease and power. The sexual talk of our times is about how to get greater bodily satisfaction or how to protect ourselves from one another. The old view was that delicacy of language was part of the nature, the sacred nature, of eros, and that to speak about it in any other way would be to misunderstand it. What has disappeared is the risk and the hope of human connectedness embedded in eros. Ours is a language that reduces the longing for another to the need for individual, private satisfaction and safety.

Isolation, a sense of lack of profound contact with other human beings, seems to be the disease of our time. There are great industries of psychotherapy addressing our difficulties in "relationships" -- that pallid word, the very timidity of which makes substantial attachments impossible. One has to have a tin ear to describe one's great love as a relationship. Did Romeo and Juliet have a relationship? The term betokens a chaste egalitarianism; it levels different ranks and degrees of attachment. "Relationships" are based on "commitments," as in "I'm not ready to make a commitment." It is a term empty of content, implying that human

connectedness can arise only out of a motiveless act of freedom. It is this contemporary condition that led me once to describe us as social solitaires. I meant by this not that we have attained the solitary self-sufficiency that Rousseau so vividly characterized and that Kant, looking to Rousseau, calls the very model of the sublime, but that we are lonely while living in society, with all the social needs for others yet lacking the ability to satisfy them.

Nevertheless the most insistent demand nowadays of people in general, and young people in particular, remains human connection, a connection that transcends the isolation of personal selfishness, and in which the thought of oneself is inextricably bound up with the thought of another. Politically, the demand for human connection is to be found in the quest for community, which is something other than a collection of liberal individualisms. There is a lot of serious thought and some action dedicated to this goal (though it is probably impossible, given the structure of our society and its basic principles); but there is practically no attempt to build upon eros, the one natural inclination, always present in every society and beyond particular social or political principles, that links us indisputably. There is much lamenting about the collapse of the family, but practically no attempt to revive the romantic rituals that once led to it and underlay it. We witness a strange inversion: on the one hand, the endeavor to turn the social contract into a less calculating and more feeling connection among its members; on the other hand, the endeavor to turn the erotic relation into a contractual one. The characteristic modern way of describing human relations as those between self and other appears to have dug an unbridgeable chasm between the two.

The de-eroticization of the world, a companion of its disenchantment, is a complex phenomenon. It seems to result from a combination of causes -- our democratic regime and its tendencies toward leveling and self-protection; a reductionist-

materialist science that inevitably interprets eros as sex, and the atmosphere generated by "the death of God" and of the subordinate god, Eros. It is summed up in debased and ridiculous fashion when young women entering college are told that "lookism" is included among the currently recognized vices, along with racism, sexism and homophobia. Yet eros begins, it's sad but true, in preferences founded on what is seen with the eyes, founded on ideals of bodily beauty. Nobody serious ever suggested that this is where it ends, but if this essential beginning is suppressed, farewell eros. A good education would be devoted to encouraging and refining the love of the beautiful, but a pathologically misguided moralism instead turns such longing into a sin against the high goal of making everyone feel good, of overcoming nature in the name of equality. Love of the beautiful may be the last and finest sacrifice to radical egalitarianism.

Perhaps a way to begin investigating the fall of eros would be to glance at that great work which influenced Americans so profoundly, the Kinsey report. It rose in the American sky like a comet, giving comfort, consolation and encouragement, as well as a lot of exciting detail about what everyone else does, to people who guiltily thought they were alone in doing these things. Open and broad public discussion of the diversity of sexual practices in America was unusual in 1948, so the Kinsey report was satisfying to people who wanted to talk or think about their private sexual lives but did not have the nerve to do so. Kinsey was the truth, and we had to face it, which was not too difficult for most people to do.

When the Kinsey report came out, I was 17 years old. At one of those bohemian parties that took place in the environs of the University of Chicago, a rather seductive lady -- from my point of view very old, at least 30 -- said to me, "You are at the peak of your sexual potentiality." She was referring to Kinsey's discovery that 17-year-old males had more orgasms daily than any other age group. I began to wonder what I had to do in order to keep up with

the norm. Kinsey's counting contributed to a certain mathematical reductionism. Such an enumerating of the variety of taste may even encourage people to acts that did not originally tempt them, just to keep up with the Joneses. It tells them to go ahead with what they desire because it is the common human practice. But it does not encourage people to think about what they desire and its consequences. Any good novelist can teach us more that is true about the meaning of our desires than can any of these amateurish scientists.

SIMPLY PUT, HUMAN sex is inseparable from the activity of the imagination. Everybody knows this. The body's secret movements are ignited by some images and turned off by others. Ideas of beauty and merit, as well as longings for eternity, are first expressed in the base coin of bodily movements. A biologist can describe male erection and female readiness and can tell us what bodily processes make them possible, but he cannot tell us when and by whom they will be set off. The truth of erotic arousal defies materialism. One sees action at a distance. And it is imaginative activity that converts sex into eros. Eros is the brother of poetry, and the poets write in the grip of erotic passion while instructing men about eros. You can never have sex without imagination, whereas you can be hungry and eat without any contribution of imagination. Hunger is purely a bodily phenomenon and can safely be left to the scientists, and now to the dieticians. But our sexual dieticians are absurd. The best you can do by neglecting or denigrating imagination is to debauch and impoverish imagination.

In a better world, sexual education would be concerned with the development of taste. All the great lovers in literature were also lovers of tales and had their heads full of sublime rivals in their divine quest. The progress of civilization is intimately connected with the elaboration of erotic sensibility and a real examination of the delicate interplay of human attractions. But everything today conspires to suffocate imagination. There have been hardly any

great novelists of love for almost a century. Scientific sex claims to tell us about the real thing. Reading classic books has become less and less of a taste among the educated. And now the most respectable authorities in the study of books tell us that the messages in those books were always pernicious and sexist. There is practically nothing within our horizon that can come to the aid of ideal longing. Sure, you can be a romantic today if you so choose, but it is a little like being a virgin in a whorehouse. It just doesn't fit with the temper of the times and gets no support in the current atmosphere.

The way we talk about love has suffered the most. Eros requires speech, and beautiful speech, to communicate to its partner what it feels and wants. Now there is plenty of talk about relationships and how people are intruding on one another, and there is talk akin to discussions on the management of water resources. But the awestruck vision of the thing-in-itself has disappeared. Out of self-protectiveness, no one wants to risk making arguments, as Plato did, for the dignity of his or her choice and its elevated place within the whole of things. What one cannot talk about, what one does not have words for, hardly exists. Richness of vocabulary is part of richness of experience. Just as there is a disastrous decline in political rhetoric -- rhetoric necessary to explain the cause of justice and form a community around it -- so there is an even more disastrous decline in the rhetoric of love. Yet to make love humanly, the partners have to talk to each other.

Students, like many other Americans, have a tendency to leave their reflections on eroticism at "You've got a right to do anything in the privacy of your own bedroom." This is a decent liberal opinion adopted to protect people from the prying eye of the law or the disapproval of public opinion. It is indifferent to what is actually being practiced, whether it is vice or virtue. It is self-protective and makes sex boring, a harmless pursuit of taste, like choosing among Baskin-Robbins's 31 flavors. One wishes that we

Americans could develop formulas for tolerance which did not at the same time destroy private discrimination of good and bad, noble and base. Does tolerance necessarily require a relativism that goes to the depths of men's and women's souls, depriving them of their natural right to prefer and to learn about the beautiful? As always is the case with contemporary moralistic formulas, this one nourishes our easygoingness, our unwillingness to judge ourselves. Yet however uncomfortable such an activity is, those who are not willing to undertake it are depriving themselves of the transcendent pleasure of eros. It is difficult for me to understand how people can accept the trivializing formula that their sexual tastes don't do any harm, when they are talking about what is, or what should be, a thing so central to their hearts and so close to the very meaning of life that it could confer the greatest benefit.

But now there is a new illiberal tendency that strangely both contradicts and supports liberal tolerance and easygoingness: the imperial project of reform promoted by radical feminism. It wants to enter the bedroom -- even the psyche -- in order to alter male sexual taste and behavior. It is not so much acts, but the meaning of those acts, that now counts. Male lust, male treatment of women as objects -- in general, machismo -- are the themes of this new sexual education. It is an education directed not to the sublime (or to sublimation), but to control. The object is not to understand the relatedness of male and female, but to achieve liberation from male oppression, or nature's oppression, to provide women with power or "choice," the great word of the movement -- choice to make oneself whatever one wants to be, free from the patriarchal structures that are said to have kept even what appeared to be the freest woman imprisoned. "Male" and "female" are no longer to be reciprocal terms, and the male habit of supposedly forcing women into such reciprocity is what must go. Of course, rape was always forbidden, and there was a codicil to the liberal formula that limited the right to do anything in your own bedroom to "consenting adults." But now we are alleged to

have a much higher consciousness of what rape and consent mean. What used to be understood as modes of courtship are now seen as modes of male intimidation.

The education of male sexual desire in the past was intended to make men into gentlemen, a term reciprocal to lady, a person whose chastity was priceless and needed protection. The new feminist women make no claim to chastity and even ridicule it. It is an affront to raise the question of chastity as a part of the criminality of rape. Whether it be a prostitute or Mother Teresa is unimportant, although not all juries have yet been persuaded of this. Rape is considered bad no longer because it assaults a weak and defenseless person's modesty, which is necessary to her exclusive attachment to the man she loves. Rape is now bad because it deprives women of power. Males are the rapists, the date rapists, the sexual abusers of children, the pornographers, the sexual harassers. Male and female sexual relations have to be adjusted to an abstract program of reforming them. There is no thought of the beauty of eroticism or love in any of this.

Supporting this unerotic treatment of eros is the hot new principle that all human relations, especially sexual ones, follow from the one motivating principle in man, the will to power. Everything is power relationships, crude power, the will to dominate, to have things done one's own way. The relationship between government and the governed is one of exploitation. The teacher-student relation is a power relation, with the teacher interested only in imposing his views and his person on the student. And above all, the relation between man and woman is a power relationship in which men have exploited and dominated women. The coarseness of this interpretation is beyond belief, making Marx's notion of economic relations seem a masterpiece of subtlety. Of course there is power in the government-governed connection, but can anyone who has experienced politics think that is the whole, or even the central, story? Can Lincoln and Roosevelt be understood not to

have cared for the governed, for the just and the good? And was Socrates merely deluded when he believed that his vocation was that of midwife, evoking only what is already within his students, respectfully trying in the first place to test their potentiality? If one compares Socrates to today's more advanced teachers, one cannot help but be shocked by the latters' insouciant indoctrination and abusive treatment of students, by their suppression of the distinctions between knowledge and power, between teaching and propaganda.

The worst distortion of all is to turn love, a relation that is founded in natural sweetness, mutual caring and the contemplation of eternity in shared children, into a power struggle. This is another one of those games that intellectuals can play. But why would anyone want to do such violence to real experience? It is the war of all against all again, and the only possible peace is to be found in artificial constructs. This is the last stage in the attempt to found all human relations on contract, the discovery of complementary interests, rather than on natural inclinations. Abstract reason in the service of radically free men and women can discover only contract as the basis of connectedness -- the social contract, the marriage contract, especially the business contract, with its union of selfish individuals. Legalism takes the place of sentiment. It is now asserted that the relation between men and women can properly result only from a haggle which conciliates their separate wills to power. All the rest is the legacy of a longstanding set of myths made up by the phalocrats. The demands of the imperial phallus are the source of all the problems.

Everything that used to be thought natural must now be overcome in the name of abstract equality. As it's put now, "Gender is not a natural phenomenon, but a cultural one." And this is not just a private opinion; this comes from official documents of the state of New York's education system. The de-eroticization of the world began in our materialistic science and has culminated practically in

this last great movement of radical egalitarianism. The most secret and interesting parts of one's body and soul are being subjected to the third degree.

It is difficult to say how people, particularly young people, react to this attempt, which has swept over the educational system to dictate the character of erotic feeling and reflection. One can expect that nature will rebel, at least in a few, as it does against all attempts by one tyranny or another to suppress it. When the Chinese Government in the 1950's responded to a proliferation of rats by putting a bounty on them, the peasants started raising rats. This was a hint that nature might be alive and well in China. I suspect it was our historicism, our belief in the primacy of history over nature that made us think the Communists might succeed in molding man in the long run according to their wishes. The most important reason for Communism's fall was forgotten nature.

Nature is, in a way, always present, and that is a great source of hope, but if one has been taught to interpret nature perversely, and if all the institutions and writings around one support that perversity, it requires a great effort of thought and sentiment to recognize it for what it is. For those who rebel against the orthodoxies of our day and the prescriptions about what they should feel and think, there is a need to recover nature, now buried under successive layers of ideological ash.